

detail, and it will find a welcome home on the bookshelves of scholars interested in the trans-Atlantic slave trade's impact on West African societies.

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## KNOWLEDGE AND HEALING IN THE EARLY MODERN ATLANTIC

*The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic.*

By Pablo Gómez.

Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 314. \$85.00, hardback (ISBN 9781496990861); \$29.95, paperback (9781469630878).

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**Key Words:** Atlantic World, African diaspora, medicine, precolonial.

In recent years, there has been a boom in the history of 'natural knowledge' and *materia medica* in the early modern Atlantic. This project has been richly interdisciplinary, and it has integrated the work of art historians such as Daniela Bleichmar and Cécile Fremont; the geographer Judith Carney; historians of the Spanish and Portuguese empires including Matthew Crawford and Timothy Walker; and historians of science and medicine such as Londa Schiebinger and Paula de Vos. Scholars of Africa and the Black Atlantic have also played a prominent role in this flourishing scholarly realm: Jose Curto's *Enslaving Spirits* (2003) ably documented the effects of European-traded alcoholic spirits on seventeenth-century Luanda, while James Sweet's study (2011) of the African-born healer Domingos Álvares revolutionized our understanding of the intellectual history of the Iberian Atlantic world.

Pablo Gómez's new book, *The Experiential Caribbean*, builds on this existing body of work, but also makes a strong case for seeing the world of black healers in the Caribbean as more than a source for Atlantic 'circulations' of natural knowledge. Gómez's close attention to a specific set of archival documents and the locally bounded questions they provoke is a refreshing change of pace in this regard. He is not particularly concerned with the question of how the cures discussed in his book were received in Europe; nor does he wade into longstanding debates about the continuity of African cultural practices and epistemologies in the Atlantic diaspora. Instead, he returns repeatedly to sensitive and illuminating readings of specific Inquisition cases concerning the 'rites and healing procedures of black Caribbean ritual practitioners' (121).

One outstanding feature of Gómez's book is its deep commitment to unearthing the full potential of the Inquisition records of colonial Cartagena. Gómez has identified a veritable treasure trove of little-known Inquisition cases. Taken in aggregate, these sources make a very convincing case for 'the power of black Caribbean communities in creating sophisticated and highly adaptable knowledge-producing practices' (8). Gómez's mastery of his archival source base allows him to make highly original interventions in the historiography of the Black Atlantic and medical practice in the colonial Americas. People who, due either to archival gaps or historiographic neglect, all too often appear as decontextualized fragments, here emerge as vivid and fully formed. For instance, we follow Francisco

Mandinga – a ritual practitioner and healer who practiced in mid-seventeenth-century Cartagena – from his capture and enslavement in Upper Guinea through to his Inquisition trials in 1648 and 1664. Mandinga appears to us as an individual rather than as a faceless representative of a vaguely defined system of ‘African healing’. This level of specificity opens up intriguing new questions for future research. For instance, what exactly did Francisco Mandinga mean when he claimed that he cured by ‘smelling’ the spiritual world? (106). Building on the itineraries of individuals like Mandinga, Gómez proves adept at linking the work of scholars of West and West Central African religious and cultural practices with the historiography of colonial Latin America.

*The Experiential Caribbean* is organized into seven chapters, each of which explores a different thematic aspect of knowledge and healing in the early modern Caribbean. Chapter One, ‘Arrivals’, establishes the historical context for Gómez’s study, arguing that ‘by the end of the seventeenth century [African and African-descended peoples] had transformed the Caribbean into a place where a new type of blackness was normative – one that used African inspirations to invent new realities’. Chapter Two, ‘Landscapes’, takes up the themes of disease and contagion, drawing parallels between the epidemiological and pharmacological environments of West and West Central Africa and those of the Caribbean to argue that ‘black epistemologies of bodies governed the physical and intangible worlds of the Caribbean’ (60). Chapters Three (‘Movement’) and Four (‘Sensual Knowledge’) are among the book’s strongest, playing to Gómez’s archival strengths by introducing the reader to remarkable cases of healers like Francisco Arará who, in 1682, ‘scrubbed’ two patients’ bodies ‘with a hen that was alive’ (115). Chapter Five, on ‘Social Pharmacoepias’, examines the interplay between the material and the immaterial in Caribbean healing practices, while Chapter Six (‘Astounding Creativity’) connects the book’s themes to a rich body of scholarship on the ‘classification and production of wonders in the seventeenth century’ (147). The seventh and final chapter, on ‘Truth and the Experiential’, argues that the book’s subjects collectively produced novel ‘experientially based ways of articulating the nature of truth’ that both complemented and contrasted in significant ways with the empiricism of European natural philosophers and doctors (167).

Gómez’s dissertation centered on seventeenth-century Cartagena, and it easily could have been turned into a fine book along the same lines. What he has done here, though, is far more ambitious and provocative. *The Experiential Caribbean* is a bold challenge to historians of colonial Latin America and the Black Atlantic, showing how skillful triangulation of archives can turn groups sometimes regarded as historiographically inaccessible into an array of richly individualized portraits. At the same time, however, the very specificity of the book’s research also opens it up to challenge from historians with a more global bent. For instance, Gómez writes at one point that ‘the cultural mores fueling early modern New World substances’ effectiveness were hardly translatable into foreign epistemologies when they were transported across the Atlantic to Europe. The adverb ‘hardly’ carries a significant amount of weight in this sentence. The work of Marcy Norton on the Atlantic itineraries of chocolate and tobacco offers a different emphasis, showing that certain elements of pre-Columbian social and cultural practice – and terminology – were able to travel into foreign epistemologies.<sup>13</sup>

13 M. Norton, *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* (Ithaca, 2008).

Likewise, one could point to C. A. Bayly's *The Birth of the Modern World*, which argued that European traders 'carefully maintained the cultural and bio-moral reputé' and 'preserved the rituals of sociability' of substances from Africa, the Americas, and Asia, even as other practices surrounding these substances were effaced or forgotten.<sup>14</sup>

These issues are open to debate, and Gómez's book is to be celebrated for its willingness to rethink scholarly orthodoxies. And, although the book's precision when dealing with the epistemologies of African-descended healers is belied by a certain vagueness when it ventures into the history of European science and medicine, Gómez is on much stronger ground when he moves into territory that may be of more interest to readers of this journal. *The Experiential Caribbean* offers several interesting points of connection with the histories of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West and West Central Africa. In particular, Gómez's examination of the worldviews and practices of African-born healers like Mateo Arará (84) and Antonio Congo (176) makes the book a superb partner to Sweet's study of Álvares and the works of John Thornton and Linda Heywood.

*The Experiential Caribbean* will be of great value to anyone interested in the history of healing and ritual traditions in the early modern world, as well as scholars of the Spanish Inquisition, the slave trade, the Black Atlantic, and global histories of science and medicine. It also serves as a model for how to avoid shuttering ones' scholarship into overly restrictive categories. Part of the value of ambitious books like *The Experiential Caribbean* is that they provoke debate. I found myself vigorously agreeing with Gómez on virtually every point relating to his central themes of diasporic African ritual and medicinal practice in the Caribbean. But on certain occasions, as when the book gestures towards larger themes in the history of science and medicine or Atlantic history, it moves onto shakier ground. Notwithstanding these quibbles, *The Experiential Caribbean* is an astonishing performance of archival mastery. Drawing on over a dozen archives in seven countries, Gómez has produced what is sure to become the definitive study of African-descended healers in the early modern Caribbean.

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## MAPPING LIVES IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

*Africans of the Old South: Mapping Exceptional Lives across the Atlantic World.*

By Randy J. Sparks

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**Key Words:** Atlantic World, geography, microhistory, African diaspora.

The increased emphasis on microhistory in the study of the African diaspora continues to bring attention to remarkable individuals whose life stories were previously unknown or

<sup>14</sup> C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Hoboken, 2003), 45.